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ABSTRACT

The geographic, enviornmental, and demographic conditions in Alaska create extreme difficulties for rural small school teachers who must cope with students with abilities ranging from gifted to retarded. Mainstreaming is taken for granted in Alaska where program development to aid rural teachers in providing special education services to their handicapped students has been slow and inadequate. Centralized approaches to program development (under the umbrellas of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Alaska State Operated School System, and the Rural Education Attendance Areas) have offered training seminars for teaching aides, itinerant resource teachers, specialists and teachers in special education, materials development, and diagnostic services. Local approaches have revolved around two models, the full district model, such as that in use in the large Iditarod School District, and the itinerant model, in which special education teachers visit village schools to monitor the program and provide guidance and resources for the responsible teaching aide. While training in Alaska is limited, rural teachers and aides can receive pre- and inservice training through the following agencies: the Department of Education (direct services to handicapped students, inservice programs), the University of Alaska main campuses (special education certification for teachers, inservice programs), the University of Alaska main campuses (special education certification for teachers, inservice programs), and the community colleges (paraprofessional preparation for aides). (SB)

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"In a One-Teacher School Can You Call It Mainstreaming?"

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INTRODUCTION

The development of special education programs in rural Alaska villages presents an awesome task. Special problems occur when attempting to deliver appropriate services to handicapped students and support professional personnel in isolated communities. These problems and a description of some attempts at meeting the challenges of rural special education are the focus of this presentation. The authors feel that while the vast distances, sparse population and extreme weather of the Far North may exaggerate the issues of delivery and support, similar problems exist elsewhere in rural sections of this country. This review of approaches designed to deal with the persistent issues in rural special education may provide others in similar situations with renewed energy to tackle the large tasks.

BACKGROUND

The environment governs the provision of all education services to rural Alaska. The state is a geographic, technological, and cultural anomaly to the continental U.S. Although Alaska is five times the size of California, it has fewer inhabitants than Minneapolis, Minnesota. Half of those 400,000 reside in one city, Anchorage. Its geographic characteristics include 39 mountain ranges, 47,300 miles of sea coast, four time zones, a climate varying from rain forest to desert, temperatures ranging (in the same location) from +100 degrees to -80 degrees, and seasons when the sun never appears or when it refuses to disappear.

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Added to these natural phenomena are the difficulties created by a state capital two time zones and 750 miles away from the population center of the state and accessible only by air or water, an extremely limited network of roads, and a general scarcity of such conveniences as running water, electricity, and telephone service.

Central to the unique character of rural Alaska is its native population. Aleuts, Indians, and Eskimos comprise roughly 20 percent of the state's total population. In rural Alaska they represent 80 percent. The natives of rural Alaska share many economic and educational realities with the Native Americans of the "lower 48", they have a low mean income and a high rate of unemployment. Few natives are employed in skilled jobs, and they have a shorter life expectancy than that of non-natives. Alaska natives possess less than one-half of the formal education of Alaska's non-natives (17 percent have no formal education at all), they are more likely to drop out of school before completion, and they have achieved little success in higher education (Hecht, 1981).

The term "village" as applied to rural Alaska generally connotes a remote community of fewer than 200 inhabitants, accessible only by air or water. Approximately 250 of these communities are scattered over a state one-fifth the size of the lower 48 states. Many of these villages have very small schools. There are 92 one-teacher schools in the state and many more with teaching couples who split the responsibilities for education between the primary and intermediate grades. Other villages may have a principal/teacher combination and a staff of from two to seven or eight others who cover the entire curriculum of the elementary and middle grades. The majority of rural schools have instructional aides, a particularly important component in the development of special education services. Most teachers still live either in apartments

adjoining the schools or in other nearby state developed housing.

The big job in the small schools begins when persons assigned to one-to-nine person schools start to experience the breadth of their task as teachers. Not only are they working with a wide age range for curriculum presentation but they must also be willing to span an ability range from gifted to retarded including sensory and physical handicaps. The teacher's efforts are generally without the backup of support resources that one is accustomed to associating with a successful mainstreaming program. Chances are there are no resource teachers, psychologists, child study team coordinators, or related service personnel on-site. More likely, the teacher and an aide are on their own with whatever itinerant, direct or indirect services the district can afford and the weather, transportation or circumstances of scheduling will allow.

DEVELOPING APPROPRIATE PROGRAMS

The development of special education services in rural Alaska has been slow and often inadequate. Over the years various programs have been initiated to provide solutions to many of the problems of getting special services to handicapped children in Alaska. Local Education Agencies (LEA's) and Rural Education Attendance Areas (REAAs), the Alaska Department of Education, the University of Alaska and the State Operated School System (SOS) each have provided fragments of service to support the isolated handicapped student and the teacher in the small school meet the regular and special education needs.

"Mainstreaming" as it is known in urban areas is taken for granted in "bush" (roadless areas) schools because neither the number of children requiring special services nor the amount of special education staff time available will support a conventional self-contained or even "pull-out" program in many areas.

This has its advantages and disadvantages. Often this system does promote a more open atmosphere for the student but it also places an enormous responsibility for program coordination on the classroom teacher. The attitude, understanding, and knowledge of these teachers concerning the exceptional learner are of paramount importance to the success of any special education program.

Centralized Approaches

Over the years, Alaska schools have experienced numerous transitions of administrative responsibility. Efforts to centralize services dominated early efforts and included the operation of schools under the umbrella organization of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and beginning in the 60's, the Alaska State Operated School System.

As early as the 1950's the government began to transfer the BIA schools to territorial (regional) supervision. However, the process has been slow. Currently, 23 schools continue to operate under their direction.

The State Operated Schools System was established to provide educational programs in rural Alaska. That system established local advisory boards but retained all decision making powers. In 1975 the demand for local control resulted in the replacement of the SOS system with the Rural Education Attendance Areas. The REAAs, although differing in many respects from city and borough school districts, provided rural residents with their first opportunity to elect regional school boards to govern their own schools.

In 1973, SOS initiated a four-part program for locating, diagnosing and educating those children in need of special services. Some special education teachers were added in villages; a special education specialist was hired for

each of 16 regions; teaching aides were hired for the smaller villages to facilitate the instructional programs; and training seminars were provided for teacher aides as well as the certified teaching staff. Assistance to teachers and aides was offered through regional workshops and contracted on-site training for individual staff members. Children received direct assistance through the instructional aide who was directed by both the classroom teacher and the itinerant resource teacher. The resource teacher visited on a schedule that was often unpredictable due to transportation and weather conditions. SOS provided aide training at regional workshops and attempted to foster the professional identity of teachers by starting local chapters of national professional groups (CEC and ACLD) and instate support groups. SOS in conjunction with the BIA sponsored the development of specialized materials for rural special education including the portable Resource Room Kits.

The BIA pioneered in-depth diagnostic services by bringing individual children and their families into Anchorage for complete assessment and a trial teaching period. This diagnostic visit was followed by returning the students to their village and with the direct assistance of the Anchorage BIA staff, and involvement of local teachers and aides, developed appropriate instructional programs.

Traveling teams of physicans and specialists were sponsored by private agencies and the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services to provide multidisciplinary diagnostic services in rural areas. However, the teaching staff profited little from the predominantly medically oriented approaches. The recommendations for service were often viewed as unrealistic or appropriate only for Anchorage placements.

The Alaska Department of Education (DOE) also helped establish Regional

Resource Centers to provide direct and indirect services to local and rural districts on a contract basis. Services to assist the rural special education programs included direct assistance in diagnosis and IEP development and some teacher and aide training.

Recently, the specialized direct services for children classified into areas of low incidence handicaps have received assistance through a private non-profit agency which operates on state funds. Districts contract with the agency to obtain services which combine direct assistance to the handicapped student and on-site training for the teachers.

Local Approaches

With the onset of REAA governance the SOS system disappeared and the BIA assumed a decreasing role in rural special education. As a result, each REAA assumed total responsibility for the provision of students with special needs. To accomplish this task, a variety of models were implemented. The examples which follow illustrate common models for providing services to handicapped students in Alaska. The first example describes the entire special education program of a single REAA. Within that district the itinerant special education model is utilized as a means of providing direct special education services in small schools. The second example describes the itinerant model in more detail and includes the necessary precautions in implementation.

Example: Full District Model

The Iditarod School District, an REAA located in Central Alaska, serves approximately 350 students in nine villages dispersed over an area the size of Ohio. Their district special education model is similar to that of many other REAAs. A total of 55 students are currently certified and receiving services

through special education. The philosophy of the program is to individualize instruction through molding the program, materials, and pace to fit the special students' needs. Whenever possible, students work with an aide or special education teacher within the regular classroom. Depending upon parent request, student input, types of specific programs being offered and teacher preference, students are often placed in resource rooms for one-to-one or small group instruction. The ultimate goal is for the student to be mainstreamed back into the regular classroom with little or no assistance. Presently, there are three special education teachers, two of whom are itinerant.

The director/teacher, located in the district office, serves the five Kuskokwim River villages and oversees the various administrative functions. A second teacher is stationed in Holy Cross to serve the four Yukon River villages and the remaining teacher works in the McGrath School, the largest in the district with over 100 students.

The special education teachers work with village schools via an itinerant model, which involves visiting each school on a bi-weekly basis and maintaining close contact with the respective special education aides. Only six of the nine villages have instructional aides. Shageluk, a village of 80 inhabitants, is provided no special education personnel. Instead, the two secondary teachers have initiated developmental reading programs, and individualized instruction, and have taken full responsibility for the special education students. The special education itinerant teacher monitors the program, offers suggestions, and provides materials. The willingness and ability of the regular classroom teachers to adapt their program to various levels of student need and ability makes this particular program a success. The larger villages of McGrath and Holy Cross serve as home bases for the special education itinerant teachers and

operate programs on a sustained basis. These programs are able to maintain consistency in service which the smaller villages are without.

Example: The Itinerant Model

A model utilizing teachers in cross-age classrooms with instructional aides working individually with handicapped children is the most common way of getting specialized services to handicapped children in rural Alaska, Ideally, the itinerant model provides frequent visits by a special education teacher who is responsible for monitoring the instructional program and providing guidance and resources for the classroom teacher and the aide. The itinerant model is ultimately dependent on the teacher aide for program implementation. The availability of competent aides to facilitate special education programs, the necessary support to guide them once on the job and the lack of continued training all restrict the effectiveness of the itinerant model. In most villages the aides are local residents, an asset in establishing home/community involvement and acceptance, but a liability in that they often lack the educational background and instructional skills necessary to perform the paraprofessional tasks.

Often aides lack managerial confidence and require frequent contact, reinforcement and feedback from the itinerant teacher. In many districts itinerant teachers are only able to make one visitation per month to the villages. Even these infrequent visits are often in jeopardy due to poor communication systems and bad weather. Many times the school radio or the village telephone is out of order. Inclement weather prevents the itinerant teacher from traveling on a set schedule. In winter, when the sun flirts with the horizon for a few hours, unlighted runways restrict travel to the short mid-day hours.

The relationships between the classroom teacher, aide and itinerant special

education teacher are keys to the success of the itinerant model. If the rural or remote site is culturally diverse, as most in Alaska are, the aide is usually a member of the dominant Native American culture. The vast majority of certificated teachers are non-native, thus creating potential for miscommunication. Many aides have retained their positions for many years while the turnover rate among rural teachers remains high. Teachers often find themselves in the position of learning community mores as well as school procedures from the aides. The itinerant teacher is especially vulnerable to exclusion and isolation, spending little extended time in each village and therefore gathering little knowlege of school and community issues and concerns. It is often difficult for classroom teachers and aides to accept the validity of guidance and suggestions provided by one who resides elsewhere and "doesn't know what it is really like."

TRAINING QUALIFIED PERSONNEL

People who choose to teach in small schools in rural parts of the country, including remote sections of Alaska, are generally there for a reason and not by chance or accident. They have responded to the allure of a more relaxed lifestyle, the recreational possibilities of remote living and/or the chance to be more in charge of their own lives both personally and professionally. The higher salary or simply the availability of employment may contribute to the choice, but the chance to be a "pioneer" remains a primary incentive for many. If the destination is rural Alaska or an Indian reservation, a desire to interact with a different culture/language may have been an additional attraction. Therefore it is neither uncommon nor surprising to find former peace corps/vista people teaching in rural or remote areas throughout the country. Those who choose such assignments are generally resourceful, energetic and dedi-

cated teachers but are often not prepared for the job ahead of them.

The average length of stay for a teacher in a village school is two years; for the itinerant teacher it is even less. Staff turnover in some communities approaches 80 percent per year.

Training Needs

Teachers in rural settings, particularly in areas like those described in rural Alaska, are subject to a set of personal and professional frustrations which center around their frequently expressed feelings of inadequacy and isolation. Personally they find themselves in new and very foreign surroundings, isolated from familiar cultural components (including the language) for reinforcement and personal exchange. New teachers frequently report being lonesome, not being able to successfully separate their personal and professional lives, lacking in privacy and exhausted because of spending valuable energy learning to adapt to the cultural requirements of the new community in addition to preparation for teaching. The professional frustrations often expressed, even by experienced teachers with an adequate background in special education, include feelings of inadequacy to handle the wide range of handicapped students in the classroom, (especially the low incidence problems), limited multicultural diagnostic skills, limited peer interaction, and lack of professional resources for consultation and direct service to the students. In addition, the teacher may have had limited previous experience designing programs with instructional aides as a primary part of the delivery system.

Research conducted by the National Rural Research and Personnel Preparation Project (NRP) at Murray State University indicated that rural teachers frequently leave their positions or do not perform successfully because of per-

sonal, as opposed to professional, dissatisfaction. NRP has developed a list of teacher competencies which reflect an integration of knowledge regarding rural delivery of instruction and skills for personal development in rural areas. The competencies include developing an understanding of the content of rural schools and their environment as well as knowledge of the differences involved in serving handicapped students in the rural and urban setting. The ability to locate alternate resources to provide special services is necessary. Rural teachers must demonstrate skills in working with peer professionals, rural parents, community members and agencies to facilitate a local support system in their rural environment (Helge, 1981).

Instructional aides in rural Alaska need the paraprofessional competencies to carry out prescribed programs for handicapped students. They need both the academic and practical skills necessary for them to assume the professional liason role between the special education itinerant teacher, the classroom teacher and the handicapped child.

Training Options

The options available for training both teachers and aides for positions in rural Alaska are limited. Eight out of every ten new teachers hired for rural teaching positions are from the "lower 48" and are often at a disadvantage in dealing with the extreme cultural and environmental isolation in rural Alaska. The University of Alaska, including the community colleges located around the state, and the Department of Education have assumed leadership for training educators for rural schools by matching training to the previously described needs.

Department of Education (DOE)

Inservice training efforts of the DOE have generally been combined with

direct services to handicapped students. Alaska Resources for the Moderately/ Severely Impaired provides trainers to help teachers in rural schools successfully accomodate students with low incidence handicapping conditions. Districts pay for part of this service as they do for the services of the Regional Resource Centers which additionally provide training workshops or individual help for teachers or aides.

The DOE also supports a federally funded statewide inservice project based in a rural Alaska community. This project provides specific training at a district's request for teachers in need of increased special education skills. At the expense of the REAA, the teachers come to a rural community with an exemplary program for one week and observe and participate in the program. Follow-up by a teacher trainer in the home school is a major component and expense of the program.

Workshops in program evaluation and parent and aide training have been conducted by DOE in many areas of the state. Recently, packaged materials for aide training have been developed for future district use.

University of Alaska System

The University of Alaska system includes three main campuses (Fairbanks, Anchorage, and Juneau)and ten community colleges. The Fairbanks and Anchorage campuses have different missions which directly and indirectly relate to the training options for rural special educators. The Fairbanks program focuses on the preparation and continued assistance to new teachers in rural Alaska through a variety of programs which have evolved over the past 20 years. For 12 years, the Anchorage campus has offered an accredited teacher preparation program which focuses on special education training at the graduate level.

Several community colleges offer Associate of Arts degrees emphasizing the paraprofessional skills required of an instructional aide. For the native aide from rural Alaska, this is not a viable option because of transportation costs and their reluctance to leave homes and families for an extended length of time. Future efforts utilizing telecommunications for distance education may better meet the needs of this group. Introductory special education coursework is available at a few urban and rural community colleges. One rural campus offers a program specifically designed to train paraprofessional personnel for the state residential facility for the developmentally disabled located in the same community.

The Univerrsity of Alaska, Anchorage(UAA)

The Anchorage campus has the only program authorized to certify special education teachers in Alaska. Students residing outside the Anchorage area have access to the UAA special education program through a pilot telecommunications project and summer school sessions. Participants do not receive a different program than their urban counterparts, but projects are individually tailored to meet the needs of the rural teachers. The pertinent issues of multicultural assessment and the location of appropriate resources receive more emphasis.

In addition, the University provides credit for district operated inservice classes, delivers instruction through workshops and classes for aides and teachers in remote areas, and offers professional assistance to districts throughout the state through program reviews and consultation. Most recently all classes in the teacher, administrator, and counselor preparation programs at the graduate and undergraduate level on each of the Fairbanks and Anchorage cam-

puses have been expanded to include units on special education pertinent to the content of each course as part of a federally supported Dean's Grant. The facilitation of this project has been managed by the special education personnel from the Anchorage campus.

University of Alaska, Fairbanks (UAF)

Traditionally the Fairbanks Campus has offered the majority of preservice and inservice training for people interested in rural teaching. The three programs described below form the foundation of rural training in Alaska.

Rural Student Teacher Program: this program is provided for the on-campus students in elementary or secondary education who plan to teach in rural Alaska. Coursework involves classes which focus on the distinct cultural and environmental perspectives found in rural Alaska. The preservice program culminates with a full semester practicum in a rural community supervised by a resident "master teacher" and an itinerant university professor.

Cross Cultural Educational Development Program (X-CED): This program is the off-campus version of the above. University professors are located in eight rural communities which serve as regional centers. Each center enrolls 15 to 25 students who complete an undergraduate teacher training program on-site. The coursework is delivered through a series of seminars, extensive practical, and correspondence work, travel projects and one-to-one learning. To date, this program has been responsible for the certification of more native teachers than the combined efforts of all other university programs.

Cross-Cultural Orientation Program (X-COP): This program offers a year-long sequence of credit courses and workshops that assist new teachers in adapting to

the rigors and demand of rural teaching. The majority of program participants are newly hired teachers bound for Alaska rural schools. Approximately 85-90 percent of all new teachers hired for rural Alaska have completed their pre-service training and reside outside the state. The X-COP Program provides teachers with conceptual tools as well as physical and interactional coping strategies. Two-thirds of this staff development program occurs on-site in the remote teaching post. Several REAAs require newly hired teachers to participate in this program while others strongly recommend involvement. The program has achieved considerable success in assisting new teachers with the adjustment process in rural schools and communities.

CONCLUSION

A 1980 report by Sontag and Button of the USOE-Special Education Programs (in Helge, 1981) describes the magnitude of the need for special educators in rural, remote and isolated areas throughout the nation and particularly in culturally distinct areas. Over 5,000 teachers were cited as needed to fill these positions. With only three out of 55 districts in Alaska classified as "urban" and the cultural diversity in rural settings well documented, it is apparent that Alaska shares in the problems and now the solutions for development of rural special education programs.

Most of the problems described in this presentation which affect the success of teachers and handicapped children in rural areas are not unique to Alaska. While the weather may be worse and the travel distances greater, the needs and the frustrations remain the same all over the country. For appropriate support to be available for both teachers and handicapped students in an isolated village on the Bering Straits or an Indian reservation in the

four corners region of Arizona will take solving the problems of greater expense, appropriately trained personnel and adequate support services. It will take understanding and sharing educational values across langauge and cultural lines. And, it will remain a big job at the local, state and national levels.

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